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Tribal Economies in Assam: A Study of Northeastern India¹

Abstract

The tribes and tribal economies have variously been represented in the northeastern region as remote, paddy producing, and land scarce settlements where the populations use the community land and collective labour in order to practice the shifting cultivation. These economies do occasionally utilize the trans-Himalayan trade and commercial network to siphon off and mobilize the agricultural surplus. The reciprocity and redistribution institutions otherwise do function to fulfill the needs of the tribal settlement and population. The state is treated among the tribes as exploitative agency and virtually an outsider entity. These tribal economic arrangements are however, recently posited to be transforming into the peasant economies to budding agrarian capitalist frameworks. The emergence of tribal elites, de-peasantized population, sedentary agriculture and wage labor market are identified as indicators of changes and transition. The predicament is however the cavalier approaches towards the theoretical and conceptual schema in analyzing the transitions and transformations on the part of the regional social science scholars and academics. There is an added problem of the shortage of empirical data to support the thesis of mode of production transition in the region.

Key Words: tribe, tribal economy, mode of production, shifting cultivation, pooling of labour, trans-Himalayan trade, colonization, wage labour, marketing, peasant economy, tribal elite, dependency model

Introduction

Tribe is a word of Roman origin, which was derived from the Latin word '*tribus*' to mean the poor. In the Roman society, it stood for the masses. Its popularity in the English usage had to wait till the sixteenth century whereby it became common to denote a tribe as a community of persons claiming descent from a common ancestor. In the nineteenth century, the tribe was pitched against the civilization which was duly reflected in Sir Henry Maine's Ancient Law (1861); the latter identified tribalism with a pre-civilized stage of human society (Marshall, 1994, p.674). In the colonial ethnography and anthropology in Asia and Africa, the tribe was subsequently treated as isolated noble savages living in the Arcadian simplicity.

Baden-Powell, the master ethnographer and anthropologist, rescued the concept from its usage. The so-called cultural trait of tribal fraternity and equality as well as economic dimensions of tribal life to the effect of establishment of a tribal agricultural order was, therefore, elaborated in detail (Das, 1996). Thanks must also go to the works of evolutionist scholars in particular. The

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tribe subsequently referred to the communities of settled fishing, simple horticulture or herding. The communities of agriculturist and pastoralist got subsumed later under the category of tribe in the modern literature. The tribe came to be identified with very limited exchange between the communities in the sequential stages of evolution of social and political structures from the band to the tribe to the chiefdom to the state (Pathy, 1982). Frederick Engels (1948) furnished the classic description of economic arrangement of a tribal settlement on the basis of research findings of Lewis Morgan in the nineteenth century. The mainstream and popular conception is not very different from the Marxian framework today. Thanks to Engels and evolutionist scholars, the conceptual and descriptive understanding of a line of anthropologist-ethnographers about the tribes in the northeastern region of India has not been an exception to this tradition. In the case of this region, an astute observer remarks it:

Economy of the tribe is a projection of tribal society, a response to the ecosystem in which it is placed; its function of production and distribution are governed by the bonds of kinship within or between families, class and kindred. The production is based on exploitation of the resources, locally and easily available with the crude technology largely for consumption. Family is the unit of production with little specialization and division of labour beyond that based on sex and age. The distribution of goods is regulated by the considerations of reciprocity. The ideal state of primitive economy is thus described as self-sufficient though of a subsistence level, non-acquisitive, non-machine and non-monetary (Singh, 1962, pp.vii-iii).

In short, the social stratification is posited to be unknown in the tribal society and the only specific type of specialization and differentiation that exists is based on such purely biological factors as age, sex and kinship

There exists an alternative tradition, nonetheless. Andre Beteille (1960) sounds a death knell to the existence of tribe in India. A. R. Desai (1960) discovers that the tribal cultural mode of subsistence in the background of wider context of modern capitalism in India is everywhere in the melting pot. The homogeneity and prototype of tribe is at the end of the road. The stratification into ranks, sections and classes within the tribe are observable everywhere without fail. In short, what is commonly accepted by now is that there is hardly any tribe in reality in the country (Beteille 1977; Desai, 1977; Dube, 1977; Majumdar, 1937). What exists today as socio-economic category is the “tribes-in-transition”. In the northeastern academies dominated by the anthropologists, the concept of tribe and tribal economy survived quite long, however (refer to the works B K Roy Burman, 1970, 1975). In the domain of political economy exercises on the northeastern regional economy throughout the seventies and eighties, the most extensive discourse has been on the specific features of regional colonization and consequent underdevelopment. In the nineties of twentieth century, there had however been significant academic and empirical research works, which did unfailingly endorsed the facts of inequalities within the tribe and deprivations of a large number of rural tribal and jhumia households in the region. Within the tribal settlements, the inequality in the distribution of land holdings between areas of permanent agriculture and that of shifting cultivation has been discovered (Ganguli, 1977; Behera, 1977). It is argued that the division of labor, exchange network and accumulation process have solidified. The tribes per se with their classical characteristics have disappeared into the thin air. This is a vital facet of secular transition.

In the present note, the features of tribal formation in the northeastern rural region of India as revealed and captured in the five overlapping and integrated structural-dependency models are described in the first section. The economic transitions of tribal settlements therein are

elaborated in the second to discover the budding mode of production in the agriculture. The note ends with suggestions about the future agenda of social science enquiry in the region.

1. Tribal Formation – The Past

In the survey of northeastern India social science literature, the descriptive representations of tribal economies can be grouped together and segregated as distinct but overlapping and complementary models. These models do adopt and incorporate rather implicitly the elements of analysis of structuralism and dependency paradigm, while elaborating the various facets of tribal underdevelopment in the regional rural economy. There are at least five minimally reducible models in the literature. It is worth remembering that they are the chroniclers and ethnographers who are ruling the roost. The professional economists are yet not on the scene in the region, who may be presumed to be experimenting with the formal mode of modeling.

Remote, Mono-cropping and Diaspora Region

In the eastern agro-climatic Himalayan zone, the topography, climate and man-made clusters of human-settlement patterns have worked as powerful constraints, and kept the northeast India a distant geographical regional space in the sub-continent. The inaccessibility of hills and mountains complemented by desperately poor networks of transportation, communication and marketing has remained the dominant features of the northeastern neck-pass region. The Inner Line Permit system introduced here in 1873, the discouragement of immigration of non-tribal as recommended by the Bordoloi Committee around the mid-20th century and the Panchsheel Yojna of Pandit Nehru and Verrier Elwin have all helped it further to keep the region remote. It was remote from the centre of colonial power at Calcutta. It is as yet politically and economically far-off from the strategic set of power at Delhi. This has been the case despite best efforts of integration policy pursued since 1972. In other words, the northeastern tribal economies are distant and remote from the mainstream national economy.

In this wet, humid and hilly terrain, the colonial policy of plunders through encouragement of only plantation crops, the natural factor of high intensity of the rainfall and the socio-economic structures of tribal kinship have historically induced the farmers to go for monocropping practice. The intensive cultivation of crops and wide range of crop diversification in agriculture has not been the history in the region. The monsoon paddy has been the dominant field crop. The forest products have been the source of food and fuel. It is a cultivable land-scarce, low-productivity and food-deficit region. The large-sized farms or latitudinal had not developed even in Assam plains due to topographical features as well as the history of recurring floods and silt-laden streams and rivers. In this mono cropping, the area under vegetables has also been meager. The acreage under commercial crops has been negligible. The commercial cropping in Meghalaya and horticulture in Arunachal Pradesh as new specializations economizing on the scarce cultivable land-use is yet to gain momentum.

The majority of tribal population resides in the hills barring a few section of tribal residing in the plains of Assam. The tribal have always clustered and concentrated in areas characterized by environment unsuitable to the settled agriculture, and therefore, there has been high concentration but lower agglomeration of tribal population in the hilly habitats. The tribal from their mid Indian locations had migrated to this region, and were absorbed as plantation workers. There has been continuous migration of non-tribal into the region since independence despite ethno-centric mobility barriers exacted by the government. In other words, the spatially remote and economically mono-cropping region has been the classical case of Diaspora in the country. This has amounted to adding fuel to the simmering fire.

Common Property and Collective Labor Resource Base

The commons and collectivity has been the dominant institutions regulating production process in the region. The social base of common property and collective pooling of labor resources have long survived among the tribal communities in this part of the country. Under the social institution of communal property rights, there existed since long, customary tenure rights system in the region. According to B K Roy Burman (Mohapatra, 1993, Pp.85-88), in the customary tenure rights system, what was important was the pattern of access and possession, the terms and conditions of access, and the source of legitimization of access and use by members of culturally defined collectivity. The concept and social institution of private property rights did not exist to foster and facilitate individuality, competition and exchange in the tribal economy. The customary tenure system over the common property resources was characterized by the absence of the concept of land as a marketable commodity. It was also characterized by the absence of any distinction between community ownership of land and the right of an individual to occupy a piece of land under the frameworks of right of the community as a whole. In other words, the distribution was not at all on the basis of recorded evidence. The cultivable land, grazing fields, grassland, orchards, river streams, and forest and mining fields used to belong to the community (Horam, 1988). The clans and tribal communities in villages used to be the owners and controllers of these common property resources. This was prevalent under both the chieftainship as well as the village council system in the region (Das, 1986; Elwin, 1955; Fernandes, 1993; Das, 1995; Chakraborty and Changsen, 1993). The individual households could hold and use the common property resources so long as they made effective and productive use of these, and as soon as they stopped their operations, their rights would cease (Burman and Sharma, 1970).

The individual family-labour based agricultural farms have been most uncommon in the region. Given the common property resources, the social institution of collective pooling and reciprocal sharing of labor resources was a complimentary production arrangement. The existence of clan-based and communal organization and utilization of human labour in rural production process under the ethics of poverty-sharing moral economy was conducive to the appropriation of surplus labour but by the community as a whole only. The choices of feudal exploitation, leading to the primitive accumulation of capital, were very minimal. The only source of such an accumulation was there in the exploitation of slave labour and domestic labour of the wives. The polygamy and slavery institutions did provide women and slave labor to supplement the family labour in Arunachal Pradesh wherever the individual property rights in land existed and the dominant households practiced sedentary cultivation. The slave labour was however also a

part of the communal pool of labour. The significance can be gauged from the fact that Captain Neufville, while fighting back the Burmese-Singpho combine during 1825-26, had released altogether 6000 captives enslaved by the Singphos (Mackenzie, 1979, P.64). This had disrupted the age-old Singpho economy where the privileged section hardly did any manual labour and the slaves had been their beast of burden (Das, 1995, p.185). In Arunachal Pradesh, there existed something called 'dormitory manpower' as well. The different other systems of reciprocal labour supply also developed among the tribal communities of the region (Haimendorf, 1962, p.43). Given the fact that jhumming was the most widely practiced method of crop cultivation requiring a large pool of labour within a short period of a particular agricultural operation, the cooperative appropriation of labour services of tribal household of a community was promoted both under the chieftdom as well as village council system of maintenance of common property resources in the predominantly labour-intensive rice economy.

Shifting and Sedentary Cultivation

The slash-and-burn agriculture has been age-old major practice among the tribal in the region. In this remote, hilly and mono-cropping characterized region, the collective labour use and the communal land control had gone together with the longstanding shifting cultivation practices. The jhumming had been the standard, popular and widely practiced agricultural economic activity in the hill tracts, and continues till date as a legacy from the past. Despite attempts of government agencies and research scientists to create the consciousness about the low surplus, soil erosion and degradation associated with the jhum, everywhere the practice seemed to have been continued till date. The settled farming households (everywhere in the region except Mizoram) continued to practice it, despite settlement initiatives undertaken by the north Eastern Council. In Arunachal Pradesh, which is an exception to the trend, the acreage under jhum has been declining fast. The land grabbed by the elite tribal under various pretexts and utilizing dubious means have been given back to the landless poor households to practice jhum as sharecropping tenants in other sub-regions of the region. Be that as it may, the region still remains a food-deficit zone of India. In other words, the jhumming subsistence sector coexists with the sedentary peasant surplus sector in northeastern region. The sedentary agriculture is yet to be widely adopted.

Reciprocity and Border Trade

The specificities of tribal trade and exchange network have been put forward to marshal the thesis of neo-colonization model of dependency as well. It is asserted that there was a time when whatever was produced by the communal property owners-cum-jhummers used to be circulated through a system of redistribution by a central authority within the clan, community and village. There used to be distribution from the central stores on a day-to-day basis to households by the chiefs or the village council heads. This was the system followed by the joint families of some tribes in Arunachal Pradesh as well (Das, 1995, pp. 27-8; Mishra, 1983, pp.18-43). In some communities, there were even common granaries. The agricultural produce and principally rice was not in the circuit of any exchange network in the region. Given the nature of

deficit production, the occasional predatory raids of the villages in the plains by the hill tribes to procure rice and other goods of significance was yet another mode of acquisition of goods and wealth. The occasional raids and wars against plain tribes used to be also undertaken to compensate the deficits. This was despite the receipt of “posa” by the hill tribes from the plain tribes. What was of significance was however the existence of trans-Himalayan commercial intercourse in the region. Verrier Elwin (1962) noted the cross-border trade with the countries of Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and China during the nineteenth century. Assam had flourishing trade with Bhutan and Tibet through the fairs and marts situated at the duar border areas. The duars used to be the seasonal market places during the winter month, which often lasted for weeks till the arrival of spring season or early monsoons. The marts used to be organized to meet the rock-salt demand of plainsmen and endi-cloth requirements of the highlanders (Goswami, 1984, pp. 22-23). The khasis of Meghalays (adjacent to Bangladesh) had also substantial trade with Bangladesh. There were famous markets like Jaintiapur, Dawki, Sheila and Phalibazaar. The Sylhet traders, mostly Muslims, were settled there, and they were the principal importers and exporters at these marts. Riverboats were the principal means of conveyance, and barter system prevailed till 1940s. In the late ninetieth century, it is worth emphasizing that the frontier trade replaced the significance of cross-boarder commerce everywhere across the region. Whereas the trans-Himalayan border trade consisted of luxury goods, the frontier trade in the region dealt mainly with necessities. All trade was however barter trade with no mediation of a commonly accepted medium of exchange.

The trade produced a specialized group of tribal traders and entrepreneurs. It was a tragedy that whatever this specialized group earned was often not channeled into the productive uses. Rather, these were generally used for procuring more wives, more cattle and more articles of jewellery-symbols of status and prestige. The wives and cattle were undoubtedly perishable items, and therefore, these did not add to the primitive accumulation process in the hands of tribal. They were the outside merchants like Marwaris who benefited since mid-19th century from the cross-border and frontier commerce. The Marwaris however rarely entered the sphere of production in agriculture, and thus, failed to act as catalyst to rural change and transformation. In lieu of this, the merchant capital of Marwaris became active collaborators with the British colonial capital in mining, plantation and extraction in Assam, and elsewhere in the region. This capital was also increasingly invested in order to extract huge profits from money-lending business and opium cultivation later. In lieu of breaking the shackle of stagnancy and underdevelopment, these phenomena helped accentuate inequalities in the tribal economies and society. The quote an authoritative remark:

Resources of the tribal villages became exposed to the pull of external demand the tribesmen became the victims of the colonial mode of trade so far as they rapidly lost their natural resources lime, rubber, madder, Mishmitita, wild life, timber, etc. These were rapidly used upthis development engendered inequality in the society because it was based on the changing pattern of unequal command over land and natural resources by individual families the process of growing inequalities was further facilitated by the inflow of money into the village economy (Ganguli, 1993, p.306).

Under such a circumstance, in order to tap the trans-Himalayan trade potential, the specialist tribal intermediaries of the frontiers were utilized later by the colonial capital under the framework of active British frontier commercial policy. The colonial administrators further organized and developed a number of annual trade fairs and permanent market places along the foothills in the region. In 1833, Lt. Rutherford started a market place at Udalguri in the Darrang

district of Assam. In 1867, the fair at Sadiya in Assam was organized. Encouraged by these developments, a party of Tibetan traders reached Calcutta with merchandise in 1920-21; they used the Sadiya route. These annual fairs and marts attracted a number of outside merchants including the Marwari mercantile community. The Marwari merchants developed monopolies in the internal trade of Assam, and went to fir-off hill marts of the region. They had been the seller of European merchandise and buyer of various hill products at marts situated at the foothills of the region since the middle of nineteenth century.

State Colonization and Neo-colonialism

The state colonization model advanced by the regional scholars and researchers is a dependency model par excellence. It sheds light on the features of the tribal economies on the one hand, and captures the essence of relations between the northeastern region and mainstream India in relatively profound manner on the other. It is argued that the state or state-like polities emerged from the indigenous social bases during to 15th century AD (Bhattacharjee, 1993). The Chutiyas and Kacharis had their Kingdoms sometimes before 13th century (Guha, 1967). In the sixteenth century, there was the unique Jaintia state stretched from the hills down to plains. The Khasi kings had established relationships with about fifteen neighboring states in the plateau, and so also the Chirois, Tripuris and Ahoms (Nakane, 1967; Misra, 1979). The stability of these tribal states depended primarily on the economic prosperity, and only secondarily on the military strength (Pathy, 1982). In other parts of the region, the Brahmanical modes of political system however succeeded in influencing the emergence of states 'where certain clans in the tribal societies became more important than others by virtue of their occupations, income and authority' (Bhattacharjee, 1993, pp.11-14).

The British colonialism recognized the feudatory states, and treated the hill chiefs as kings, and made them de facto owners of communal land, as in the case of Lushai and Khasi (Chaube, 1982). The colonialism allowed the persistence of traditional quasi-feudal potentates, and at the same time rather enhanced their control over the tribal subject and slaves. The formation of strong regional states was however not completing due to colonial commercial policies and interests. The British colonization arrested, and rather halted the process through its distorted policies. The colonial administrators had brought the traditional elite of chiefs, *Gaonburas*, priests and traders to conditions by their policy of persuasion, retaliation and appointment of a number of political interpreters and Jamadars between the colonial powers and tribes (Das, 1995). The colonizers made the chiefs in Mizoram the de facto as well as de jure owners of an otherwise communal land in return only for the services of chiefs as lackeys of the British colonizers (Dutta, 1992, pp.101-5). The colonial plunder and extraction of surplus through trade networks abounded once the active commercial policy was framed. This has accentuated the regional dependency. The region never witnessed democracy and development. The nobles of older order were turned into lackeys, and the region was made dependent on the colonial metropolis of Calcutta. Assam became a colonial hinterland according to the thesis of Tillotoma Misra (1980).

The social and political institutions in the post-independence era were designed to facilitate the process of tribes conforming to existing system of governance based on electoral politics. A mainstream culture of dominant collectivity based on the caste hierarchy and sanskritisation

process was implanted along with a positivist state-ist structural set-up based on the principle of majority rule. This has however further accentuated the regional dependency. In most cases, the nobles of the older order have been rehabilitated in suitable positions under the new socio-political order. A group of tribal entrepreneurs who were not often directly associated with the political and/ or administrative power heads also emerged from the ranks of educated middle class in the region. The flow of money in the form of plan and non-plan central government and public expenditures had enabled a section of people to be actively engaged in various spheres of administrative bureaucratic decision-making process and change their financial fortunes within a short period of time. The process of accumulation in the hands of certain sections of the local people has got a great fillip with the interlocking of economic and political powers as well. It is this new generation of the elites who are now molding the society, polity and economy of the region. These elites at the helm of power are however now 'the faithful collaborators of the national merchant and industrial capital' (Das, 1995, pp.185-97). In short, the post-independence pattern of development and modernization along capitalist mode may remind some of the model of internal colonialism proposed by various authors.

2. Economic Transition – The Present

There are scholars who still explicitly chant the slogans of tribes, culture and community in the region. B K Roy Burman (1970, 1975) is the leading exponent. It is nonetheless true that a stage have finally arrived to incorporate the thesis that neither the analytical category of tribe proper nor the tribal community in pure form exists anymore in the northeast region. There is unfailing transition process at work. What is found is the differentiated (tribal?) situation, which was not there in mid-sixties and early seventies. The most important development in the field of tribal research over the last twenty-five years has been the generation of an enormous amount of data on tribes. It is now clear that there is not one tribal economy but that there are many tribal economies, which are getting integrated with national market. A highly complex, differentiated and stratified tribal situation is apparent today (Singh, 1993, pp.1-6).

There are two vital dimensions of such transitions in the region. One, such a transition and transformation have not been accidental. It has evolved through several forces – both endogenous and exogenous – in the past (Pathy, 1982). The role of the state among external forces on tribes has been paramount. The post-independence approaches to tribal development, in spite of the seemingly theoretical soundness of the philosophy propounded by Elwin and Nehru, the tribal planners and policymakers have set free the forces of disequilibria. The tribal sense of cooperation is being replaced by individual completion, and class formation has assumed a concrete shape in the classless tribal communities (Behera and Roy, 1997, pp. v-vii). Second, there are two vital propositions of the thesis of economic transitions in the region worth consideration: the emergence of peasantry with stratification, and duding of the mode of production transition either to the peasant economy or agrarian capitalism. What is going through transition is not the archaic tribal mode of production however, but rather the old transitional mode of production based on slavery-feudalism continuum (Misra, 1982; Das, 1995). The new phase of transition has been postulated by utilizing the classical economic framework of surplus, giving rise to a peasant economy and peasant mode of production (Ganguli, 1992, 1993, 1997). It has also been alternatively affirmed that some variant of agrarian capitalism as budding nascent economic system, with concomitant cultural values and

institutions imposed from above, has been making in-roads into the erstwhile so-called tribal economies (Dutta-Ray, 1983; Upadhyay, 1997; Das, 1995). Most of the scholarly works of both the conceptual-analytical frame work cited above, more often than not, relied on the very significant Marxian postulates of Jaganath Pathy (1982, 1984).

Peasant Economy

In the northeastern region, the archaic tribal social formation vanished long back. The British colonial administration during the nineteenth century did encounter pastoral and agricultural economies of tribal settlements from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh, which were at best characterized by a slavery feudalism continuum. This is further vindicated in the following observation:

The pre-colonial social formation of Assam witnessed the persisting influence of tribalism, a deep-rooted institution of slavery and a process and growth of consolidation of feudalism, which remained incomplete. The elements of tribalism dominated the production system of Assam until the end of sixteenth century. The Ahom state however encouraged the growth and consolidation of feudalism particularly since the seventeenth century. The process of tribalism to feudalism had inevitably had accompanied by the growth of slavery the political chaos caused by growing contradiction between the emerging feudalism and the oppressed peasantry on the one hand and the contradiction within the ruling class over the issue of appropriation of surplus on the other, had finally paved the way for colonial intervention. Historically, this is very significant event, because colonialism was imposed on a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society (Sarmah, 1998, pp.303-5).

In Arunachal Pradesh, the slavery institution was the main pillar of economy. The patrician privileged ones and plebeians were at least two sharply distinguished strata of tribal society. The chief and priests as well as the frontier trade merchants had control over the productive resources including human labour. The headman in the village councils, wherever the system was prevalent, was also one who possessed intelligence and wealth. The status enjoyed by the strata in such kinship-base society was largely predetermined. The plebeians consisted of commoners, cultivators, porters, servants and even non-tribal slaves. The colonialism simply strengthened the existing social stratification further (Das, 1995). The economic system incorporating elements of both feudalism and slavery prevailed in the region till very recent times (Misra, 1979; Misra, 1982).

The state formation preceded by the rudimentary stratification, division of labour and sedentary agriculture, producing surplus was the principal actor in transformation and transition of such transitional economies of slavery-feudal continuum into the peasant economy (Ganguli, 1997). Ganguli (1986, 1993, and 1997) has postulated the thesis of metamorphosis of tribe into peasant, peasant economy and peasant mode of production developing in the northeastern tribal region. The process of transitions posited to have had begun in the beginning of twentieth century. The tribal-cultivator had been evolving into a peasant, who were owing individual property rights in land, settling on the land of permanent plough based sedentary agriculture, utilizing individualized family and wage labor, going through the process of fragmentation into nuclear family units, forced into the differentiated economic relations with other peasants and rural actors, involved in monetary transactions, brought into the nexus of tenancy and indebtedness, and finally, de-peasantised by the set of endogenous and exogenous forces

beyond control and discretionary power. The socio-economic inequalities and livelihood deprivations of a section of tribal-peasant households is the outcome of peasantisation-depeasantisation matrix originating with expanding surplus. The conclusion is sharp and focused:

In replacement of such a primitive mode of production, the peasant mode of production based on individual ownership of plots of land with possibility of surplus and accumulation thereof has been emerging all over the NETR [Northeastern Tribal Region of India] under the impact of both endogenous and exogenous forces of change. Generation of surplus and its accumulation inevitably engenders economic as well as social inequalities. This is what has been happening in the NETR [Northeastern Tribal Region of India] (Ganguli, 1993, p.298).

It is argued that it was the size of surplus, and the state formation rather than trade and technology, which determined the extent and pace of transition. The agricultural technology of settled cultivation was confined merely to isolated pockets of tribal settlements; the volume of trade in luxury and necessities across frontiers and orders was meager despite being able to break the closeness of tribal economies. These, thus, failed to act as catalysts to change and transformation. It was rather that state formation, centuries back in Assam and recently in Manipur and Tripura, which facilitated the transfer of expanding agricultural surplus from the subject communities to non-producing public authority. The particular post-independence ideology of development centered on encouragement of individual landownership, settled system of wet rice cultivation and special multipurpose tribal blocks development programme further triggered the process of peasantisation and growth of peasant economy in the region. The transition to sedentary cultivation practices and the economic interventions of the state as significant agents of change and transformations have led to greater capacity to produce the surplus. The monetization, commercialization and class formation in the agrarian structure were catalyzed subsequently. A dominant group of rulers emerged earlier as well as later to appropriate the surplus produced by the peasantry. The size of surplus kept on increasing and along with it the size of agricultural labour and private ownership of farms as well. A peasant economy duly stratified and differentiated among classes was consequently bound to emerge and progress in the course of time. A number of local peasant economies are traceable today in the region in general and Assam in particular.

Agrarian Capitalism

The agrarian capitalism is budding as a historical culmination of the decades-long structural transitions of erstwhile tribal economies in the region as the alternative thesis put forward by a host of scholars and academics including Mishra (1983), Das (1995), Upadhyay (1997) and Datta Ray (1997). In the framework of this transition model, there are five facets of agrarian capitalism in the region. First the decline of common property resources and individualization these resources along with privatization of land and other resources, which remained confined to a few tribes in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh had been wide spread in reach and impact over the years (Ganguli 1992, Roy and Kuri 1997, Das 1995, Agarwal 1991).

Second, the phenomena of inequality in the distribution of landholdings and sharecropping tenancy are increasing in the region. The predominance of small landholders has long been observed in the case of agriculture in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Assam. Such

predominance has recently been witnessed evening Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, which had traditionally been the areas of predominance of medium and large-sized land holdings. The land tenancy has been on increase. In a region, where approximately 30% of all households are landless (Das, 1989, 1990), the tenants are not hard to be found. The gentleman farmers and absentee jhumias have been leasing out land to poor and displaced jhumias, marginal land size holders and immigrant outsiders like Nepali in Meghalaya and Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh. The current fallow land as well as land in the hitherto other-than-fallow category over which neither the jhumias nor the government had claims has been grabbed by the rich, powerful and elite tribal households, and subsequently given to the sharecropper-tenants (Ganguli 1997). The land under wholly leased-in and partly leased-in holdings has increased mainly in Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. There exist today five strata of the so-called tribal households to underline the phenomenon of inequalities in the region. These are, excluding the rich peasant and elite households, following: purely jhumia households, partly jhumia-partly settled households, purely settled agricultural households, partly jhumia-partly tenant households of either marginal jhumia-cum-wage labour or purely landless wage labour category (Ganguli, 1992). These strata form a hierarchy not only in matter of ownership of land holdings but also livestock ownership in Meghalaya and Mizoram in particular. The increasing use of high yielding varieties of seeds in Arunachal Pradesh, which can be afforded by only those peasants who have purchasing power, further bespeaks of inequality.

Third, there has been fast transition from the subsistence nature of production in the regional agricultural economy to sedentary cultivation practices that has the potential of producing considerable surplus. Both the wet rice valley cultivation between the hills and flatlands as well as the terrace cultivation methods have been getting popular for some time. The wet rice valley cultivation is the most efficient rice cropping system in the region, both from the point of view of ecological balance as well as cost-benefit equations of economic calculations (Ramakrishnan, 1993, 1997). The acreage under home gardens for vegetables production, which are both ecologically and economically highly efficient, are picking up. Arunachal Pradesh has been a forerunner in this regard. The acreage under commercial crops has also become substantial. In short, the erstwhile tribal agriculture has become an efficient enterprise.

Fourth, there is a budding labor market side by side the land market in the region. The process of formation of individualized family labour and wage labour has been coincidental with the growing replacement of shifting by sedentary agriculture, and the depeasantisation phenomenon. The landless labourers have ever been out-migrating to cities and urban locations, after their land being grabbed by elite tribes. In a region, where scarcity of farm labor, for example in Assam, had been a historic fact, the use of plough bullock or draft animal labor has necessitated the growing pool of wage labor. Thanks to growing inequalities and pauperization in the region, the agricultural labor growth has recently been phenomenal in the eighties and nineties in the twentieth century. In no other states in India, there has been such a fast percentile growth rate observed.

Lastly, the road to agrarian capitalism is being more and more cleared by the increasing pace of generation of marketable surplus of the peasant agriculture. It is not the government regulated and formal markets which are disposing the surplus. The oft-quoted marketing problems in the region is a reminder to the fact that it is the network of informal, unregulated and unorganized market places like hats, bazaars, etc. which dispose this surplus rather than the formal, regulated and organized market places, transportation and communication network. Moreover, what has

developed is not as such the agricultural produce market but rather the markets for horticulture and plantation crops. The marketing of pineapple in Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, of orange and lemon in Manipur, of citrus fruits in Meghalaya and Nagaland, of apple in Arunachal Pradesh, of coconut in Assam and Tripura, of tea in Assam and of rubber and coffee in this region have picked up fast. In Assam, there are innumerable weekly haats and bazaars in different districts. The volume of arrival of produce in Hahim haat in Kamrup district and Datama haat in Goalpara district has been considerable in recent years, which are auctioned by the Guwahati Mahikuma Parishad annually against heavy rent. It is generally however the non-tribal who win the bid of auction. They particularly control the bulk of transactions in these haats and bazaars. The small tribal peasants visiting the markets are mostly indebted, and therefore, generally use the haats and bazaars to dispose the surplus to Bengali and Marwari mahajans in order to pay the loans in the season. According to a study conducted by the Tribal Research Institute of Assam in two Boro-Kacharee villages of Goalpara district of Assam in 1977-78, the nexus of moneylenders and mahajans on small peasants have undoubtedly grown in the region. Meghalaya presents further burning example.

Future Agenda

In the theory and model-building exercises of both the tribal economy proponents as well as the economic transition advocates, there have been very little reference to the primary works in the domain of structuralism in sociology and economics in general, and of the dependency models of Latin American scholars of world fame in particular. It is therefore needed that original theoretical contributions must be cited, while empirical operationalization is orchestrated to analyze the specificities of underdevelopment of the tribal economy. Second, the difference between sociological concept of stratification and political economy conception of class differentiation has often been blurred in the economic transitions literature. Both are used as being interchangeable. The analytical and statistical specification of the emergence of agrarian Kulak or capitalist peasant is lacking in the literature while the description of the emergence and growth of maneuvers of the so-called tribal elites in the region are flourishing. The Marxian concept of class is analytical one, which differs sharply with the categories of stratification literature. Such conceptual as well as statistical problems must be resolved.

There exists only a crude estimation of land-cover and land-use in the northeast region. The documentation of ownership rights of individual plots of land, and the identification of the same is not yet over. There is thus acute necessity of a comprehensive cadastral survey in the region. A large-scale household-oriented field-survey, backed by a prior comprehensive regional cadastral survey, would be the urgent agenda in the next millennium. In the new millennium, a theoretically sound and sophisticated level of discourse and debate on the mode of production in the north-eastern hill region (NEHR) or the north-eastern rural region (NERR) would be the most welcome development in the academies and government research bureaus. The conceptual refinements on the triple categories of peasantry, market and the state, and analytical improvements in the methodologies of studying these categories would go a long way in the specification and delineation of presently budding mode of production and exchange in the region. The methodology and analytical framework to study the categories of mode of production exist outside the regional literature elsewhere in India, which can be borrowed. Many significant questions in the perspective of the mode of production analysis are

unanswered at present; for example, what is the nature and configuration of northeastern regional peasantry? Are there economic differentiation process progressing among the peasantry? How many economic classes different from each other exist? What is the nature of property relations among the classes of peasantry? What is the nature of exchange relations among the classes of peasantry? Does there exist a market in land, labor, credit and agricultural produce? These are significant issues to be resolved with sound database backing not only for the sake of conceptual-analytical refinement and sophistication of discourse in the academies but also in matter of operationalisation of public policies and economic planning in the corridors of government.

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